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ABSTRACT

In this series of aphoristic remarks about the situation of English teachers in the junior college, the following topics are discussed: administrative structure and accountability; teacher load; part time instructors and professionalism; Proposition 13; literacy and junior college students; evaluation of student papers; careerism in teachers and students; teacher morale; and teachers' perception of the professional situation, including proposals for change. (DF)

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Some Notes on "Hunting for Mushrooms in the Slough of Despond"

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(For me at least, giving a talk and writing an article are sharply different enterprises. My verbs and my prepositions underscore the difference. I write an article for an audience. I share a talk with an audience. If I write an article and then read it to an audience, I sound very much as though I'm reading an article. My remarks in Orlando came from running notes, rather than from solid, consecutive prose. Your editor asked for "something" in time for this issue of the newsletter. There was no time to convert the notes into a proper essay. What follows are most of my notes as they appeared on the tape, edited to get rid of the semantic snarls, the redundancies, the "deadwood," and lapses into a style too casual. Also missing are a few notes which I think now I should never have included in the first place and perhaps a few that the editor excised for want of space.)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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1a I have trouble starting to work up a talk without some kind of title to set me in motion. The one I'm working from here is "Hunting for Mushrooms in the Slough of Despond." I was not far into it when it occurred to me that there were at least two problems with that title. One is if I say "Sloo," all of those who think it's pronounced "slow," will think I mispronounced it. And even if I say "sluff," I would be right, but nobody in the room would believe it.

1b The second difficulty is that the topic is hard to develop further. I remember a book I didn't buy once that really intrigued me. The title was Military Justice is to Justice what Military Music is to Music. The bibliographers in our trade are a strange breed. They are to the larger profession what oboe players are to symphony orchestras. They're needed, but they are strange. And they have a concept governing titles of talks, articles, and books. That concept is "high information density." This title illustrates that concept--there's just too much information in the title. Any group of English teachers would know that I am here to talk about the slough of our despond.

1c I'd thought of, but rejected, another title: "My Name is Not Clausewitz." But first titles are like first loves--they retain a special attraction. So let us—now that I'm stuck with the title--explore the slough of our despond.

2a There are, some say, administrators out there who think like Clausewitz. Karl von Clausewitz was a consultant to the German high command during the period of reorganizing the armies of the previously separate German states into a single,

unified army. And Clausewitz's conception was pyramidic. At the top one needs a few "bright, industrious" people--the thinkers and the wheelers and the dealers. Under them one needs a broader band of "bright, lazy people," who are smart enough to understand what the bright industrious ones are up to, but too lazy to mess around with things by infusing new ideas into it. And then at the bottom, one needs a great,broad band of "dull, lazy" people who will do what the bright industrious ones tell the bright lazy ones they want done.

2b Not a few administrators think that the schools are, or should be, organized in this way. We're somewhere in that bottom band. They hide out in their offices, almost, it seems, for fear that we might discover something about them that they don't want us to know.

3a Another part of the slough is teacher load, which we talk about often. NCTE--specifically, both College Section and NJCC--has drafted position statements on teacher load. And as one reads them now and wanders around the country, they look like a topographical map of Shangri-La, or something, but surely not a map of where we live.

3b An increasing number of part-timers staff our classrooms. Many are very good people. It's just somehow, by virtue of their marginal positions, they're not a part of the profession. If I'm going into brain surgery, I'd like to know that the person who's doing the surgery is a full-time brain surgeon, not someone moonlighting at this for part-time supplementary income.

3c Then there's California's latest export--Proposition 13, which is hitting other states now, too.

4a There is the public outcry for us to make literate (whatever that term variously means) all students who come to us. And the criers are not just the public. Some four-year universities will accept two-year college transfers at the end of their second year, but subject them to a proficiency test, which they do not lay on their own sophomores becoming juniors.

4b I know of a major university with a fairly recent minority group program for the freshman year. Before the rest of the faculty would approve the program, they wanted a proficiency test at the end of it. And so the program sponsors said "all right, but why not lay the test on the other freshman students, too?" Eighty percent of the minority group students passed the test. The English department is still sitting on the scores of the non-minority university students.

4c My daughter Elizabeth--a young woman of about 16 years and strong passions--lusted recently after a particular purse, and her mother said, "For Christmas, maybe." But she didn't want to wait until Christmas. She hates babysitting, but she dug in her heels and found enough gigs so that she could buy the purse on her own. A few days later, she went off shopping with a girlfriend. She put the new purse down on the counter, went over to try on a sweater, and came back to see that the purse was gone. She was depressed and angry. About ten days later, in came a package from Rantoul--a town about 20 miles up the road--which contained the purse and a note. Something to this effect--"Dear Elizabeth, I took the purse and I meant to keep it, but now I'm sorry and Jesus told me I had

to send it back." It went on to say that when she took the purse, it contained three dollars, some change, and some bubble gum which she had thrown away. She sent five dollars in the purse so that Liz could buy some more bubble gum.

4d I read it three or four times, and I'm still touched by that note. But then I read it as an English teacher. Son of a gun! There was a fragment and a run-on, four misspellings, exotic punctuation, and idiosyncratic capitalization.

4e I remember talking to a group of teachers of English in England. The ones that I talked to were pretty cavalier about marking papers. They spent most of their energy getting students to <u>want</u> to write. Then they'd let them write and casually check the writing now and then. Sometimes not at all. And I was commenting on the difference between our approach to papers and theirs, and one of them said, "Well, maybe that's because all the Puritans emigrated to America." It's worth thinking about.

4f I happen to think, incidentally, that that was a lovely letter, and I would have given her an "A" on what's <u>really</u> basic--honesty and clarity in telling her feelings.

4g An interesting term in vogue now is "functional illiterate." What they mean, I think, is non-functional illiterate. The only functional illiterate I know of is the central character in Mangham's story, "The Verger." This man worked at a menial job in the church. He was a caretaker, and they discovered, to his shame, that he didn't know how to write his name or read, so they fired him.

4h He went into business on his own in a little shop across the street and did very well indeed. Somebody later discovered that he didn't know how to write his name and asked him, "Where would you be now if you had learned how to write your name?" And he said, "I'd be the verger in the church across the street." There is a functional illiterate.

5a Another part of our despond is our students--not just the new ones making new demands on us, but the others too. And they roughly divide themselves into two groups--the lunatics and the idiots. I don't mean those terms in the current usage. I mean their classical meanings. Lunatics were people who were so overwhelmed by everything that they didn't quite get anything done, and the idiots were the ones who concentrated so much on one thing that they didn't see the rest. We have our lunatics. To help them we teach them how to write a five-paragraph essay, and two days late they turn in 3 1/2 paragraphs. They can't quite get it together, though God knows they try.

5b And then there are the idiots--the career-oriented students who want to know what all this has to do with what they want to do. A dental hygiene student asks us, "Why is it important for me to know the difference between run-ons and fragments?" And not being dental hygienists, we can't tell them. We just stutter and say, "It's important, believe me."

5c I used to work for a chain of package liquor stores in Southern California, and it was a good job--good hours, good pay, great boss--and we employees would find ourselves saying to each other, "This would be a great job--if it weren't for the customers." So is teaching. It would be a great job, if it weren't for the customers.

6a So, here we are, in the slough of our despond. What do we do?

6b It occurred to me we might hunt for mushrooms. If you can't find mushrooms, someone else suggested hunt for truffles.

6c I went back to re-read the slough of despond to see if I could find any inspiration there, then I realized the lie I was telling myself, that I just told you--someone talked about the degeneration of, the deterioration of Tennessee Williams' heroines: they sink from alcoholism, to prostitution, to putting on airs. And I was just putting on airs.

6d To tell the truth, as English teachers often say, I hadn't read it "personally." But that's all right; I've passed tests on books I haven't read "personally." This time I did read "personally" the passage about the slough of despond, and there are two things I learned there: one is that the slough was of Christian's own making--nobody did that to him. As the narrator tries to explain, the King had been trying for 1600 years to drain that slough, and to cover it over, but despondent Christians kept pumping it back in. That was the first thing--it was Christian's own slough, not something that somebody placed in his way.

6e And the second and frightening thing was that Christian could not get out of the slough until another allegorical character named Help, came along and lifted Christian out and pointed him in the right direction. I seem to have backed myself into the role of Help, and I'm not quite up to it. But perhaps I can point to some concealed stepping stones and footholds that lie beneath the

surface of our despond.

7a One thing, I suggest, is that you join CCCC, and I'll tell you, in case you didn't know, that for five dollars you can get the journal; for another 20 dollars, you get the vote, but it may be that the journal would be enough to start with.

7b Second, help foster the regional conference; you can do that when you go home by writing a departmental memo that tells all the others all that they missed here in Orlando. You can even lie a little if you want to--that's all right--you're not selling this meeting, you're selling Birmingham.

7c Next, you fill up the cars to Birmingham. People who drive in empty cars by themselves aren't playing the game right.

7d We should remember our own careerism before we become impatient with our students. When I was a student at Berkeley, wanting to teach at Diablo Valley College, I had to take a course in the history of the two-year college. I wondered what that had to do with Victorian literature. We are all careerists. When you're teaching a course in World Lit and you discover there are ten policemen in the course, it's not enough just to add Les Miserables to the reading list. It would be a shame, on the other hand, to take a perfectly respectable course and transfer it into "Cop Lit Around the World." I don't mean either of those.

7e Next, we should banish the third-person plural in all of our talk about students and administrators. The third-person plural is a feeding ground for every stereotype known to man or woman. So we don't talk about those students--we

talk about that student. That's okay. We don't talk "administrators." We talk about Dr. Brown and try to understand what he's most afraid of, what he would most like to be doing, and what's he most worried about right now.

7f We should also recognize the difference between morale and esprit de corps. (We use them as if they're interchangeable, and they're not.) Esprit de corps is what you feel when everything is going great. Morale is what you feel when it's not going quite so well. There's a difference between the '60s and the '70s in our profession. In the '60s there was money all around;there were growing enrollments and jobs for everybody--then we had esprit de corps. Now we need morale. During the early part of World War II, there was no problem in selling war bonds. The government could sell them as fast as it could print them. But by the latter part of the war, when it seemed as though we were winning, we had to get Bob Hope out there and Rosemary Clooney and so on.

7g I remember in those World War II movies--one of the real cliches was the scene of a landing craft coming in toward the beachhead filled with 20-odd nervous young men, a stern looking sergeant, and a guy with a harmonica, playing soulful music as they came in. It would seem that they never drafted violinists in World War II--just harmonica players.

7h Can you imagine some GI sitting there playing his violin on a landing craft? It doesn't work. Violins are for esprit de corps. Harmonicas are for morale. And it's time for us to bring out our harmonicas.

7i My next suggestion is that we turn inward, as Christian finally had to do. I remember from my childhood a man who hypnotized animals in a sideshow. He hypnotized a dog, then a cat, and then a pig. It was really funny when he hypnotized the chicken--he took this great, squawking chicken out of a basket, flattened it out on a table in front of him, reached in his pocket, took out a long piece of chalk, and drew a line from one edge of the table, over the top of the beak, out to the other edge of the table, let go, and the bird was frozen in place. And he explained to us that given the way chickens eyes work--they really think they're tied down when you do that. And I wondered later if what he did was to stun the chicken and to hypnotize us into believing he'd hynotized the chicken. I discovered later that's not true. It really works when you do that to chickens. And I guess one of the things we ask ourselves, or should ask ourselves--is whether all those restraints and constraints we feel are imposed on us, are roughly like chalk lines. We might test them out now and then.

7j I found a poem recently, called "The Center of the Garden" by a woman named Ann Stanford, and I guess I'd like to share a part of it with you now. "The Center of the Garden":

> You are the center.
> Not the pool where dryads
> pour the water forever in meaningless gestures,
> nor the stairs with stone balustrades
> where eagles spread their useless wings of stone
> nor the clipped alley between cypress hedges.
> You are the garden.

7k We do make our own sloughs.

71 I'd like to share one more poem. A friend once offered to drive me from a New York hotel to the La Guardia Airport. I accepted that offer. We took the shortest, the most direct route, over the Queensborough Bridge, through Queens, out to the highway, out to LaGuardia. And I guess I hadn't seen anything quite as ugly as Queens in a long time. Just endless pavement and brick row houses. Hardly any earth anywhere in sight. And then I boarded the plane. The current issue of The New Yorker included a poem, called "The Roses of Queens." I didn't make the connection.

7m I wondered, "What Queens?" I thought maybe Queen Elizabeth I had started a rose garden, and the queens of England ever since then had tended it, right down to Elizabeth II. But that wasn't the "Queens" the poem was talking about.

7n I share with you now the first of five stanzas of "The Roses of Queens," by Claire Nicholas White.

> Among the topless dancers,
> warehouses, factories,
> disorderly patches of weeds
> and rubbish on traffic islands,
> behind the endearingly dated
> facades on Steinway Street,
> bloom in the pocket-sized gardens
> the astonishing roses of Queens. . .

7o I hadn't seen a single rose in Queens--not because they weren't there; I just wasn't looking for them.

8a Meanwhile, I think there are a couple of things we can do to improve that situation. I learned four things; four different lessons in coming down here from Urbana. First, there was a cancelled plane on the ground in Champaign-Urbana that was originally headed for Washington and New York--the early morning jet, and the trouble was that there was snow in Washington, and Dulles was closed. I watched people respond to the situation, particularly those who had originated in Peoria, only to find that the next leg of the flight was cancelled. Some of them stood in line, got a refund, and Hertzed it back to Peoria. The people who were getting on in Urbana just went home. Others, though, picked up my plane to Chicago, knowing that if you're going to Washington or New York, your chances are a lot better out of Chicago than they are on the two flights going out of Champaign each day, sometimes. That's what they did. Meanwhile, Ozark had more Chicago-bound passengers than would fit on the Fairchild scheduled to fly out. So what do they do? They took the jet intended for Washington, now grounded, sent it up to Chicago, and carried all of us who wanted to go there.

8b I arrived at the airport a little early, needing coffee but with no change for the machine. I put my dollar bill into some coin changing machine, and it was bonanza time--there was change all over the place. I went and got my coffee. While I was standing around, another person came up to the dollar bill change machine, put his in there, and the machine rejected it. And I felt that I was lucky to have been there before it ran out of money. The other person put the dollar bill back into his wallet, took out another dollar bill, put that in the machine, and it was Las Vegas time for him, too.

8c Coming to Orlando on the flight from Chicago, I found that my tray table sloped towards my lap. When I got my Bloody Mary, the stewardess said, "You're going to have to watch that," and just left me there. I managed the Bloody Mary, and then they brought the lunch tray, put that on the tray table, and it slipped toward my lap. But this was a different, more experienced stewardess. She said, "Lift up your lunch tray." And so I lifted up my tray, she reached up above, got two pillows, put them on my lap, and put the tray table down on it again. A carpenter couldn't have levelled it better. It was an option I didn't know I had.

8d Yesterday here at the hotel, about five people went out in the last sun rays of the afternoon (also the first sun rays in two days) sun-bathing--two of them wore topcoats. It never occured to me to go out in a topcoat on a cold day and sun-bathe, but it seems to work fine.

8e The way "it" is is not necessarily the way it has to be. But we can't just wish things were different, or wish someone else would make them different; we'd better take a lesson from that other person at the airport. If the first dollar bill doesn't work, don't keep putting it back in. Try a different bill.

8f But in the short-run, I guess, and the long-run, too, I think our first, last and best hope as people, as well as teachers, is in looking hard for the astonishin roses, of Queens, of Cleveland, of Birmingham, of Dallas, of Northern Virginia. Even though its under ten inches of snow, I'm going back to Urbana to look for the roses.